

the first cleaving of its water, by downstream Indian adventurers whose tribal name for 'canoe' was 'missouri'--never bettered, may I say, as a beautiful name for an inspiring river. Then came Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery, the day-by-day eyes and inks that captured onto paper for us the two-thousand-three-hundred-mile arch of the river from St. Louis to its Three Forks headwaters. Then followed the building of forts, America coming west by military and trading-post handholds along the Missouri's immense chain of drainage. From that, the axe-quick renunciation of the river's forest silence as woodhawks, perhaps within sight of here where we stand today, chopped trees into boiler-lengths to feed the steamboats. And onward, then, to the imprints of homesteaders and townplanters on the floodplain of this great river. Until now, a little more than one-third of the way through this century, the pattern is as set as cry and echo, each annal desiring a next--the human tide and the Missouri River, hungrily flowing together into storied destiny."

Roosevelt paused, to let the applause roll before he went on to the invocation of the dam and the useful work it had brought and the future in which every drop of the river's water would do its duty. The

sheriff stared at him from his trucktop, finally grasping this President's bargain with danger and all else.

Surfacing. That was what it was like, the way Roosevelt rose.

The sheriff himself was only a so-so swimmer, nothing like this famous habitue of therapeutically warm pools, but he suddenly savvied FDR's way of thrusting himself up out of that wheelchair. Breaking upward through the polio that had sucked him down into it; rising past the political turbulence that ought to have sunk him. And once up there, having breached crippling infirmity and gravity and whatever the hell else, the irons clamped on his more or less legs to hold him in place, the presidential sonofabitch presided. You couldn't not listen to <sup>him,</sup> ~~the lordly~~

~~SOP~~ the sheriff had to admit, even if you thought you couldn't stand any more of that voice sanded so smooth by old family money. No, you listened, to his old tricks, new tricks, whatever he brought up to the surface with him this time <sup>when</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt dove up into the air, onto a political platform and on out into the ethers of radio, he took you over by all the tricks that ever swam.



The majority of the President's hearers in the crowd had seasons of Fort Peck behind them, the making of the dam the prime calendar of their lives, and like the intent little sheriff, they listened as if <sup>they were</sup> being paged one after another. Damworkers of every stripe, householders of Wheeler and the other shantytowns and the apple-pie Fort Peck townsite, in their thousands they took in the grand words FDR had come to give them. There were absences. Nan and J.L. Hill, with the wages of laundry and dynamite, gone back to their ranch country of English Creek. <sup>self-vanished,</sup> Jaraala, of course. But others and others were here, shareholders in this, ~~the day of Roosevelt.~~ The Birdie Hinchies of this earth, by that name and many others. Tom Harry in shining fresh shirt and blackest bow tie. The crisp officers of the Corps. Years' worth of Duffs, in plentiful scattering across this Fort Peck scene. The Fort Peck they had cooked <sup>and notched its pay days one after another</sup> for, Hairdressed. Waited on. ~~Typed up,~~ 2. Danced with and more. That they had cleared brush off. Built dredges for. Walked beneath in diving uniform. Fashioned an earthfill onto. Carpentered and dug and labored for in a dozen different ways. Now they listened hard to the great voice telling them this dam was theirs as much as anybody's. A searching eye

with enough patience could have picked the tribe of them out of even this crowd, family resemblance in the way they stood akimbo but attentive, like soldiers picketed, one here, another over across, pair there, the Duffs as ever unmistakably in evidence; all but two.

#

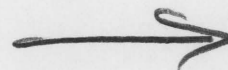
No one would notice, today. That much they knew about this. The rest was the treacherous part.

Where they were, the sound of Roosevelt and the crowd's roars of applause were a distant surf.

They kissed hard, as if to get past any doubts.

Holding to each other, they clung so close their heartbeats registered on each other's skin. When they broke apart for breath, her fingers walked up the cleft in the middle of his chest. She asked, "Are you thinking about suppertime?"

"No." Last thing on his mind; the way they were touching each other crowded out all else. "Why would I be?"



"That's when we have to start pretending." He knew what she meant.

From here on, careful at home, careful at family get-togethers, to not say each other's name too often. Or too seldom. "I'm not going to like that," she whispered, although there was no need for whispering.

"It just came to me, the feeling of dreading supper tonight. And

I wondered if maybe I was picking it up from you."

His hand cupped the back of her head as if weighing its contents judiciously. "Am I getting myself in with a mind reader here?"





Her fingers went back down the dale there on his chest. Not whispering now, but softly enough, she offered: "I suppose we'll see."

"Then we had better hope it doesn't run in the family," he provided back to her.

Slowly their hands moved down on each other to where things begin.

## Part Seven

## SLIPPAGE

1938

"Know something,  
~~by you know what,~~ Shannon? I'm hungry for mountains."

"Tom, what the sweet hell do you expect me to do about that?"

Although she immediately knew.

"All I'm saying, it doesn't hurt anybody to think ahead. Fort  
Peck isn't going to last for--"

"Cut the guff. How ~~soon~~<sup>quick</sup> are you pulling out?" she demanded.

"While yet. Before winter hits again." Proxy kept up her icepick<sup>#</sup>  
gaze at him until he had to specify. "End of October. Gonna try it over  
in the Two Medicine country. Pretty, around there." He folded his arms

on his chest, looked at her and said as if reminding them both:

"Mountains."

"Have fun." Proxy's smile was so slanted that Tom Harry muttered about bookkeeping to tend to and strode to his back office. She watched him go, the entire length of the Blue Eagle. She would miss this place, not to mention its contribution to her stash of Durham sackfuls of dollars. Wouldn't be the first in either category, though. <sup>Jee</sup>  
~~Holy~~  
<sup>Zuz</sup>  
~~crapola~~, though. End of October. Next month already. Tom was playing his cards so close to his chest they had to be read through the back of his shirt. One thing sure, she was in no mood to fend with some new cherry of an owner here; didn't want the hassle of breaking a fresh one in to the way she went about things. The new stupe probably wouldn't even have a Packard. Briefly she wondered whether to ask Tom to put in a word for her with Ruby Smith. That skag Snow White was working the Wheeler Inn, though; room for two milk-blondes? Proxy decided not to ask, she didn't want to be obligated. As Tom Harry had always put it, no hobblegations.

# —

"Funnily enough, Owen, I am for war."



They had been back at their surgery of the world, arguing through mouthfuls and dipping philosophical sustenance out of open lunchboxes, during the spectacle of Munich. for the past week of noons, Darius, considerably red-eyed from sitting up nights with the radio and the Czechoslovakia crisis, could not help but feel history was dogging him personally. Down your tools, boys! The cobble streets of Scotland in '15, ringing against war. The fields of death are hungry... They still were. Across them now, though, the big bugs in brown shirts, black shirts, trousseau of goose<sup>steppers</sup>. There's this bit, too: pick the bones of truth out of it and I myself have already employed war. Against Crawford.

"What, for King and country?" Owen winged in on him as if snapping down a playing card. "Where's that in the workers' catechism all of a sudden?"

"You have to understand, Owen, this Hitler is an armed daftie."

# ———  
Nineteen thirty-eight, Munich's year, spun out of the sun in days  
spoked with fierce light and shadow.

Marx's grave at Highgate in midnight gloom while a steel dawn slides  
across the eight time zones ruled by Stalin.

Hitler, howling hate in the Nuremberg torchlight.

Spain a political bed of cinders, under Franco. Italy the dark  
bootprint of Mussolini.

Japan's flag of a bloodbright rising sun, catching the morning  
across the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The United States can quench all this at our shores, say Senator  
Burton K. Wheeler and Charles Lindbergh and other isolationists. Water  
will do it, oceans lay between America and the world.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt and his people govern on the principle that  
almost anything, including water, can be amended.

# ——— "They're feeding Europe to him like a tray of buns," Darius went  
on. He shook his head at what passed for statesmen these days. "Joe  
Chamberlin's chinless lad Neville. You can bet the best part of him  
ran down his daddy's leg."

Owen shifted a bit on the shale cutbank where he was sitting on  
his coat. His attention tended to drift when Darius got going on  
British political Pooh-Bahs. From this lunch spot on the east abutment,  
above the core pool, the dam lay below like a scale model on a classroom

table and bone-weary as Owen was from the pace of work, he never grew tired of this instructive view. The jigsaw puzzle pieces around the edges of the project--railway spurs, haul roads, maintenance yards, the spillway three miles over the hills behind him--done now. The dam itself already functioning, the four giant steel-lined diversion tunnels taking the regulated flow of the entire fifty thousand square miles of river the ~~Missouri~~ drainage. The beautiful physics of this, the matter of the water funneled to become white foaming energy, the contained Missouri fauceting out of this one-of-a-kind dam, he had tried and tried to make Darius see. He was the one of the whole damn family who ought to be able to see it, grasp the process. But the only physic that seemed to interest Darius was the one he wanted to administer to the world and make it purge its political guts. # While Darius went down his list of major fools in charge of things, Owen contented himself with his inventory of the dam. Oh sure, a few items of it he happily could have done without. This shale under the seats of their pants, to name the foremost, with its ~~damnable~~ tendency to crumble off the abutment and mess up the waterlevel in his core pool. Bearpaw, yeah, it wouldn't



take much of a bear to paw this crackerass rock apart. # To name the

other, he never had liked the scheduling setup on the face of the dam, where he as fillmaster was responsible for the gravel layer but not the riprap work which was always treading on the gravel crew's heels.

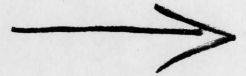
How about all or nothing for me there

on the facework? he'd tried on Major Santee. How about doing it the Corps

way for once? the Major put the kibosh on his try. # Minor stuff, though,

either of those, compared with the big thing they were leaving to him,

the topping-off. Twenty feet to go, on the last of the mountain of fill.



Height of a nice two-story house, is all. Okay, it'd be a two-story

house four miles long, but so what. Off in the haze along the autumn

river, his dredges were flushing fill in from as much as five miles

downstream and doing it smack on schedule. Darius was not a hundred

percent wrong, the world was a worry, but Owen's own bit of high ground

couldn't have looked better this cool September noon. He knew almost

to the day, now, when Fort Peck would be topped off.

"And France." Darius was shaking his head twice as strenuously.

"The French, Owen, have gone steadily downhill ever since Sorel."

"Speaking of downhill," Owen seized that opening and stood up,

unaccountably intent--to Darius--on not missing any minute he could

spend on the dam. "We better get back down on the job, world or no

world, while we still have one."

#  
DROP CAP

The year was producing something like armor on the Fort Peck Dam,

the riprap boulders steadily being lodged into place on the upstream side.

A blanket of gravel was laid first, down the slope of the dam, so the

gravel trains still ran incessantly across the ghost trestle. Bruce

shook his head every time he glanced over there where the trestle had

been systematically buried, footings and pilings and everything except the railroad track itself, every high-stepping inch of it now under two hundred feet of Owen's earthfill sluiced in since last spring. No sign of the river channel ~~any more~~, either; by now the dam made a solid blunt horizon across the entire valley, and while Bruce granted that it was nice all their work, especially his, had added up to this piece of geography the world had never before seen, it left him restless and bored.

Goddamn it, though, we ought to up and leave. Going to have to pull out anyway when...but yeah, when is when?

Bruce didn't like being of two minds this way. Mostly he was on idle time ~~any more~~, "getting paid for drinking coffee" as he liked to boast of it, just a little. Whenever he was summoned to dive, these days it was usually to inspect the end wall of the inlet to the tunnels or to deal with something caught in the trash rack there where the river funneled through the dam. Lots of yawn time, though, as now. He wandered over to the middle of the dam, where the truck ramp came down to the snubnosed dock called Port Peck, and watched the crane barge unload base boulders for the riprap, each one a truckload in itself. When the appeal



of that shortly wore off, he prowled back to where the diving barge was moored, trying to look like a contented man of leisure. <sup>he couldn't help it,</sup> But

the not-diving made him hungry for the river. The lake, as it was awfully quickly turning into. The plugging of the river had changed the look of things there, underwater; without the channel flowing, the water had muddied up, gone filmy. Curtained. The last dive he'd done he had tried as many as three of the thousand-watt underwater lamps at once and they weren't much better than, what, candles. Far from cursing it, the new darkness of the Missouri intrigued him. Nighttime in the river, mid-day. It all went with what Bonestiel had told him, when he was breaking Bruce in at diving. Watch out for the kill-line. A kill-line, said the Louisianan, was where the tidal salt of an ocean surged up a river delta and certain freshwater fish went belly-up. Difference is, you can't see our kill-line. Which is why you got to watch for it--

Bonestiel tapped him in the center of the forehead--in here. The Missouri's new dark drew a diver's kill-line a little closer, Bruce knew, but kept him on his toes more, too. And that was what Bruce wanted, that kind of edge to toe up to but no farther. <sup>4</sup> Standing on

the idle diving barge, he yawned and wished a little something would go wrong, a clog in the trash rack maybe, so he could suit up and go down. It helped keep life interesting.

# —



Hugh as dispatcher of rattlesnakes was still making the rest of the Duffs uneasy, but as Meg would have been the first to point out, when had he ever made them easy?

It's not exactly a livelihood we can take with just anywhere, though,  
eh, Meggie?

Whop. Another rattler off the living list.

Not sheathing his machete yet, staying poised atop the riprap until he was sure the severed snake didn't have a companion down there in its lair, he pondered whether it was worthwhile to keep collecting the tails. The rattle trade was in decline, with the dam workforce at only about half what it was a year ago. Birdie insisted sales would take a turn up, any time now, as soon as it dawned on everybody that now was their last chance for a Fort Peck keepsake, but Birdie was not someone you wanted to set your watch by. Although who was he, Hugh, to think that.

What am I, any more? Graduate of Carteret, class of <sup>628</sup>~~627~~ days ago.

(Keep track. Take pride in your new calendar of life: another Carteret golden rule.) Dry days, every last blessed damned one of them. Now that I have the moisture out, though, I amount to--what? Farmless farmer.



Damless damworker, about to be. Where our next wage is going to come from, I suppose we shall need to see, eh, Meggie? Winter in this country does have a way of concentrating the mind.

He stepped down off his refuge of riprap and took the rattle off the snake.

#

I am not a forgetter, Hugh. Haven't you done well, at staying on the wagon; but there is still your large record, from before. To this day I can hear you, prating against Owen's dam. Hugh the yew hewer, you scoffed at yourself when you were put at clearing the bottomland.

"Meg," you said, "this piddly work-by-the-hour, this is never us."

Fort Peck has not always been my cup of tea either, but without it, where would we be? Shorn of the boys' wives, each of whom I occasionally wish I could give a good shake, but all in all, not a bad lot. Darius would be an ocean away, still, and while I cannot commend his taste for peroxide, he has stirred you to life more than once, has he not. (You are better off not knowing the stirrings he induced in me.) And we might lack Jack, Companion of my unemployed days.

And you, Hugh, would be the specimen you so long were, a bottle worshipper any time the moon changed.

So, we are past much. A corrected man, you of the Carteret cure,  
at least in that one habit. But there is yet old distance to be made  
up, between us. That, Hugh, has not changed.

# ———  
 She was practicing her eavesdropping. Charlene was in her hair but properly so, pushing a wave in and then making it hold with the marcelling iron, and while this was going on there was no reason not to rubber in on the A-1's other customers, one woman done under the dryer and waiting to be combed out and her permed friend waiting for her and both with tireless tongues. Blue Eagle and dancing had been uttered.

"Who's on?" the one asked.

"The Melody Mechanics," said the other.

"Oh, them. I can't stand to see that Three Finger Curly on the guitar. It gives me the willies, the way those stubs--"

Three Finger Curly! I never in a million years could get away  
with a name like that in a--

"I like the one who foodles around with the clarinet, though."

Rosellen could not help but despair for a moment. Try as she might to invent people in her stories, in life they simply sat around and,

well, foodled themselves beyond what she could think up.

Uneasily waiting to take her out for a bite at the Rondola before they went home, Neil was sitting up front by the coatrack, whizzing through magazines. The beauty shop even smelled to him like someplace a male shouldn't be. The two biddies gabbing at the back had given him an acute looking-over when he wandered in and took a seat while Rosellen was being finished up, and Charlene had not helped matters any by kidding: "Relax and enjoy it, Neil. Blessed art thou, among women."

He sneaked <sup>peeks</sup> ~~little looks~~ between flipping pages, rare chance to see what went on in here. Each time the marcelling iron came out hot from its midget oven, Rosellen's hair benefitted that much more. Working over her, Charlene still had on a full-front apron from putting the chemicals in on the permed pair, but being Charlene, she simply looked like a million dollars that happened to be wearing an apron. Neil had heard that a place like Chicago had lady barbers, one of the prime attractions for ranchers who rode the trains in with their cattle, and he could see the benefits over having just any old guy rubbing the hair slickum in, yes he could.

p. 693A follows →



Rosellen had her eyes closed now, waiting out Charlene's ministrations to her hair. She had spent this week, which seemed like forever, typing up the Corps' history of the dam project, Colonel <sup>armenter</sup> ~~Pemberton~~ having instructed Major Santee to compile it and Major Santee having delegated it to Captain Brascoe, and Captain Brascoe might as well have written with only one letter of the alphabet, zzzzzz. <sup>#</sup> Churning out the ~~Captain's~~ version Rosellen had wished, now that everybody's time at Fort Peck was numbered, that Charlene or <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Rhonda~~ or even Proxy or Meg had lived somewhere else, so that she could have written letter after letter telling whichever one all the things of these years here. (Toston would have done, ~~f~~for Charlene. Proxy was harder to imagine a place for, she had worn out so many addresses already.) That wasn't quite it, because Charlene and any of the rest of them who had alit to Fort Peck, including Darius down from the moon, were all part of the story. There'd need to be another Charlene or whoever, the way Neil and Bruce were twins. In any case, someone out there on the other end of the words. But, lacking that correspondence in the invisible ink of wish, all she could do was keep ~~restlessly~~ <sup>g</sup>ploughing along with Captain Brascoe's compilation, ~~livening it up with a little~~ <sup>2</sup>

mischievous now and then. (In Fort Peck's realm of natural attractions, the major items lacked distinction she'd giggled at and deliberately misdid as the major's item lacked distinction.) Even Captain Brascoe's handwriting provoked her. He printed, ~~about~~ like a super-scrupulous fourth-grader, so in effect she was plunked there at the typewriter turning pages of neat little block letters into pages of neat slightly littler block letters. ✓ Rosellen, not much one for sighing, sighed now.

Hugh and Meg and no doubt Darius had a saying for doing anything that annoyingly useless: Pulling up nettles to clear a way into the thistles.

"About done, hon," Charlene's voice broke in on her drifting.

Alert again, Rosellen realized Neil had been watching her get the beauty treatment, and she rewarded his patience with a quick grin and wink.

On his part, Neil had been saving this for supper, but for the sake of something to do besides sitting here like a bump on a log he offered it ~~at large~~ now:

"Your hubby is landing me a new job," he said as if talking to Charlene about the weather.

"Hey, don't I get to hear this, too?" Rosellen let out, as he'd

p. 694A follows →

pick up  
from  
p. 693A

figured she would.

"You're hearing it, aren't you?" Neil grinned at her over an opened magazine.

"All right, Secretive," Charlene said. "We bite. What is it?"

"Poking traps."

When he said that, he saw eyebrows go up in an identical way

on both Rosellen and Charlene behind her. ~~After a moment, it was Rosellen was still looking~~

~~surprised when~~ <sup>who</sup> Charlene giggled and said, "In the footsteps of giants," meaning Hugh and Birdie.

"Size 12s." Neil shed the magazine, onto the pile he'd been through.

"I'll be working with Birdie, so it's kind of an easy-chair job, in a way."

Rosellen hoped she was looking convincingly surprised. She hoped a lot harder that her having wangled this fresh job for him would simmer Neil down on his inclination to quit Fort Peck before she was ready to.

"Keep at it," you're always telling me. You don't know the half of it.

"'Duff, Neil Milne, dredgeline trap inspector,'" she tried out loud, just the way she had it already down on the payroll roster. "I like the sound of that, Neillpoke."



~~"Duff, Neil Milne, dredgeline trap inspector," Rosellen grandly  
recited his new payroll designation. "I like the sound of that, Neilliepoke."~~

"Yeah, well," he said, wishing she wouldn't call him that in the

hearing of the biddies at the back, "it was Owen's doing."

~~this didn't work~~ <sup>out</sup> ~~so that we could~~  
"Too bad ~~we can't~~ all get together tonight," Rosellen said on impulse,

as much to Charlene as to Neil. The three couples of them, supper at

the Rondola and then the movie and afterward maybe seeing what those

Melody Mechanics amounted to, would have been fun; but Bruce and ~~Phonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup>

any more could only afford a night out on payday, a full week from now,

and Owen was working late on paperwork he'd been putting off. "How

about coming with for supper?" she tried for Charlene at least, make

some kind of occasion out of ~~it~~ <sup>this.</sup> "Birdie Hinch's new right-hand man

will probably even buy, hm, Neil?"

"Likely to be chicken, real fresh," Neil got in the spirit with Rosellen.

"Just because you're beautified and ready to paint the town," Charlene  
said to the back of Rosellen's head. "Some of us know the meaning of work."

Addressing the intent two customers at the back of the shop: "Mrs. Foraker

is going to have my scalp if I don't get to hers right after this, isn't

that right, Mrs. Foraker?" The two tittered, and went back to an uneasy low conversation.

"It sounds like you're stuck with only one of the famous Tebbet sisters for dining companionship," Rosellen informed Neil in a kidding la-di-dah voice.

"Aw," he registered disappointment. "Too bad you weren't quints, my odds would be better."

Just listen to them, Charlene thought as she manipulated the marcelling iron. ~~Two dews in a ducat, that saying of Darius's about any lovebird~~

behavior. (She'd finally had to ask Meg what the devil it meant. Why,

Charlene. 'Two doves in a dovecote,' came the amused mother-in-law

enunciation.) A lot more than Rosellen, Charlene wished she and Owen

had the night off, could go out with the others and frolic. They both

could stand that kind of a change. Nights lately, he had been giving

her a hard time about life after Fort Peck. Or pretending to.

The Corps has levees on the Mississippi up the gigi, Charlalene,

he teased. I could latch on there and build forty-foot versions of

Fort Peck the rest of my life, how about.

worse yet:  
Or ~~the worse:~~

They're already talking about another big Missouri dam, over in  
North Dakota, bright as a new penny, him. Who knows, if they think this  
one is a sweet enough example they may go for dirt on that one, too.

She wasn't sure how much of it was teasing. She figured Owen was not any too sure, either. What she had managed to pin him down on was leaving Fort Peck.

Around the time we put the dredges in winter harbor--he caught himself,  
with what sounded to her like rue.  
and laughed, Okay, we'll be quits with the dam around the first of  
November, does that suit you better? No winter harbor, this year.

~~Maybe not here, she thought to herself. A little closer to the~~  
~~time, though, and she would try out her own ideas on him. Bozeman;~~  
~~they could hole up there until spring, sort themselves out in a nice~~  
~~town. Or go out and have a look at the Coast; Seattle, Portland,~~  
~~California, things were always being built in those places.~~

In any case, harbor for winter, just for themselves. That would be different and was she ever ready for it.

# —



Kate  
 It gets to be a lot, ~~Rhonda~~ thought. The waitressing hours she  
 could handle, Jackie as a wildcat three-year-old she could more or less  
 handle, the complicated raft of Duff in-laws she could handle, even  
 --well, handle was too strong a word there;  
 Bruce in his less sterling husbandly moments ~~she had been able to handle~~  
 was the better expression, for now. But anyway,  
~~or at least put up with~~ ~~But~~ handling them all together would test Houdini,  
 she was beginning to believe. She felt guilty for feeling so, but  
 take right now, when she just had rounded up Jackie from Meg and was  
 trying to keep an eye on him and listen to him chatter about his day  
 with Mum Mum while at the same time supper had to be figured out and an  
 educated guess be made on Bruce, whose hours were more unpredictable than  
 ever now that he was on idle time.

"--an' it scared me poopy, Mommy."

That nailed her attention. "Jackie, honey, let's don't be saying that,  
 all right?" With his particular grandfather, two uncles and great-uncle  
 added onto his father, not to mention the general run of mouths in Wheeler,

Kate  
~~Rhonda~~ considered it a wonder that Jackie's language wasn't saltier

than it was. "If you say that around Mum Mum, Mum Mum will have kit--

Mum Mum will not be very happy." She snared the boy to her, then knelt down

on one knee to be at his level. "Now then, Jackerado, what came along and scared you?"

"My nap."

The boy watched the tip of his mother's tongue peek out between her lips, and then she was making a frown at him.

"How--what scared you about that?" <sup>Kate</sup>~~Phonda~~ asked, doing the best she could with her voice. Normally Jackie slept in the style of his father, like a petrified log.

"There was--there was a, a, a swimmy thing."

The tightness in her throat now threatened to shut off words there entirely. Instead they flooded to her mind. Dreams aren't--I can't have  
passed it on to-- She worked her dry mouth and throat, the boy looking in her face reproachfully. "Tell Mommy"--she knew what she had to say, although not what to do if Jackie started telling her about being tied to the thing in the river--"tell Mommy all about it."

The boy lifted his shoulders nearly to his ears. "Nighthorse!"

"Night--?" Meg is going to have him talking in Pig Latin, if I  
don't watch out. "Yes, honey, everybody gets those. But in yours,

what did the swimmy thing look like?"

The boy pouted tragically. "Like a washclaw."

~~Kate~~  
~~Rhonda~~ nearly fell forward in relief. Jackie resisted baths. She and Meg long since had enlisted Bruce to do tub combat with him, and even so it took all of Bruce's persuasive and other powers before the boy would let himself be subject to soapy water and washcloth.

"Mum Mum says don't let the old nighthorse get me. I too big to, Mum Mum says."

"That's right, Jackie. Be big." That's what we all have to try to be, against the nightmares.

# —  
**DROP CAP**

It was tricky, finding ways to meet, be alone together.

The two knew that carelessness, even once, would do them in. All it would take was some other member of the family noticing the least little thing, odd coincidence of her and him. Or picking up a bit of gossip: I thought I just spotted your better half on (her) (his) way into...

Reading it back into the behavior they both tried to keep so pussyfoot.

Then word would be dropped, well-intentioned and devastating: They're not going off together to learn to play the zither, are they.



They'd managed to meet three times before, this way, and if the third time was a charm, did the count grow better or worse from here on?

They did not absolutely have to, but they made love in whispers.

Afterward, other whispers:

"They're going to catch us yet."

"Not if we quit this now."

"If."

#

## DROP CAP

With so much of Fort Peck done, there was a general expectation that the last of the damwork would fly into place. Veteran and expert as they were at it by now, and with only the topping-off and the riprap left to do, virtually anybody ~~of~~<sup>m</sup> the workforce would brag that the dam could practically finish itself now.

Darius, however, had noticed something to the contrary.

A hiccup in the system always attracted him, and this one had locomotive proportions. What had been the regular rhythm of the gravel trains, laying the way for the riprap work, seemed to have a skip in it now. Keeping track day by day from his vantage spot in the bullgang, he found that the interruption sometimes stretched to half an hour or

more, before a train would come backing onto the crest of the dam from the east--opposite of the usual rail flow--and hurriedly dump its gravel cars. The third time this happened, he also caught sight of <sup>Owen</sup>~~Ainsley~~, ~~the gravelmaster~~, in an arm-waving argument with the train dispatcher.

Interesting. Here they have this piece of work by the throat and it slips away on them that little while, every day.

Owen would <sup>tell him</sup>~~know~~ in a trice, what the problem was. For the sake of tactics, of course, the one person Darius was not going to ask was Owen.

# ———  
That night he said to Proxy, "Dust off your in-law manners, love.

I want to have Hugh and Meg over for supper one night quite soon."

"My ears must be playing out," Proxy told him. "It sounded like you said have people over. Here."

"The last I knew, here is where we live," he said with what she thought was undue reasonableness.

"But look at this place!" She seemed genuinely scandalized by the muss of the houseboat, as if heaps of this and stacks of that had crept in on them during the night. "There's stuff everyfriggingwhere!"

"Paint it all gold," Darius said airily.

Proxy looked at him narrowly, but knew there was no seeing it yet.

What he had up his sleeve.

# ———  
 Lima beans of extraordinary hardness and a meat loaf dry as Melba toast and an ~~unlucky~~ <sup>fortunate</sup> brown gravy and mashed potatoes with the gravity of dumplings--Meg could not have been more pleased with the meal Proxy produced, believing as she did that food was a direct index of morals. Hugh, too, appeared to take the philosophical approach. Nothing like these tastes, he thought, since those shots of goop at the Carteret Institute.

Munching gamely, Darius kept up the conversation through the meal while the other three made pretenses with their forks. At the predictable point where Proxy scraped the leftovers into the slop pail and Meg insisted she would like to help with the dishes and Proxy sharply said never mind, they'd just put the plates outside to poison the gophers, Darius cleared his throat a trifle.

"Umm, Meg," Proxy issued. "Want to see the view from out on deck?"

Actually Meg felt quite at home in the clutter of the houseboat and had been daydreaming a bit again of Inverley and when she and Hugh and Darius were green in judgment and trying to make up for it in kisses and



flirtation<sup>②</sup> but Proxy sounded as if she had something on her mind.

Such a novelty is not to be missed, the Milne attitude toward battle formed up in Meg, and the two women went out.

<sup>③</sup>  
"Hugh, you're a man of exalted position now," Darius said genially, meaning Hugh's hopping route atop the riprap and the burrows of snakes.

"You'd know this. What's the bind with that gravel crew every infernal day? We're racing past them with the rockwork."

"I do my best to be on hand up there," Hugh said like a regular Owen at the opera, "just to hear ~~Ainsley~~ cuss a blue streak when he's short that train."

"Whyever are they running fewer gravel trains? I thought a big push was on to--"

"They're not. What they're trying to do is squeeze in an extra train, on our shift. That's their headache."

"Pull my other one, Hugh. How can they be carrying in more gravel and ending up with less?"

"It takes some doing, I admit. But figuring out when to squeeze that train in, get it backed down onto the dam and so on, that's what's

giving them fits. Owen no doubt can cite you chapter and verse as to how soon now they'll have it worked out and the extra train will be one more feather in--"

"No, no, I wouldn't want to take up Owen's time with such a small matter."

~~##~~ \_\_\_\_\_

"An exceptional meal, Proxy," Meg was saying.

"Sure, you bet. Dessert is going to be a stomach pump."

"No, now, don't go hard on yourself," Meg said as if glad to do it for her.

Evening brings all home. From the deck of the houseboat, riding the swell of ridge above the long dam and the waterglassed valley it now stopped the way of, the two women could see the lit curving streets of Fort Peck, the dashes and dots of lantern-yellow windows in the shacks of Wheeler and Delano Heights and Park Grove and the other thrown-together towns, nocturne of the Missouri. They watched the car lights streaming out of the harbor lot as the last of the day-shift went off work.

"Quite a picture, huh?" Proxy said at last.

"Quite," said Meg.

"Had an offer once from a guy to come in with him on a photo studio up near ~~at~~ Lake of the Woods," Proxy spoke as though this tale was being spelled out to her in the lights of the night. "I could be his darkroom assistant, he said. It all seemed kind of phony, though. I mean, here he was, lining up honeymoon couples under cardboard trees in that studio of his, and right outside there was this real woods." Proxy shook her head like an auction-goer.

~~an auction-goer.~~ "So how could I trust him on that darkroom stuff either, right?"

When Meg chose not to comment, Proxy mused on. "Real picture shooting, that'd be something else. That fancypants photographer who was here, I asked her what kind of a deal she had. She said her wages were just okay, but the way that magazine paid her expenses was a dream. 'Here, hire an airplane.' I could go for that. But I've never had any too much luck, taking pictures. Not sure I've got the eye for it."

"A person can't have equal talent in all directions," Meg stated.

That got under Proxy's skin, as Proxy knew it was intended to. ~~mine~~

~~is all from the tits on down you mean, don't you, Lady Meggie.~~ She

turned her head enough to size up her adversary there in the dusk. Meg's composed profile, with that aggravating knack of staring off as steadily



as a figurehead. On down, she was better than okay in the entire figure department, too. Meg was a beckoning woman, still. Not that there were as many years between them as Proxy wished. Try this on for size, though, old sister--one of us used our time better on Darius, didn't I.

"Speaking of talent," Proxy returned the needle, "you're happy putting yours into being grandma these days, hm?"

Meg now turned her head and studied Proxy a moment, then seemed to go back to counting the lights of the dam and its towns. "I am attached to Jack."

"Attachments are tough," Proxy could agree.

# —————  
"I know these dammers are always pulling things out of hats," Darius was saying. "But wherever do they hide an extra train?"

Hugh, sudden dam expert, was only too glad to hold forth. "What, can't you guess? Someplace where they can tuck <sup>g</sup>about twenty gravel cars, then yard them down by gravity when there's a little time between other trains?"

Darius's head stayed cocked quizzically, which seemed to please Hugh.

As though Clydesiders were not the only ones who knew the ins and outs of equipment, Hugh now provided:

"The spur line, up at the spillway."

"Ah," said Darius.

#

Mouthfilling kisses led to this. Always had, always would. He hoped.

Honey and milk. Under the tongue. Solomon knew whereof he sung.

She granted.

Almost there, both, crashing at each other, their crazy pockets of passion about to spill, she under the tent of his elbows, he on her and in, straining together in sounds that threatened the shack and could tighten throats and make lips lick among the rest of the populace of Wheeler for all they cared right then.

Duet under the covers done, she caught her breath. "That was spirited."

"Margaret, you always let your praise run away with you," Hugh said through gasps.

Meg knew she was never going to be proficient in the afterpart of

p. 708A follows →

this as, say, old campaigner Proxy, but she determinedly pecked a kiss onto Hugh's sharp cheekbone and let spring: "I wonder if they know what ingredients they put in at that Carteret establishment."

"Fruits of love, Miss Milne," he surprised her right back.

Combatants on the field of marriage so many years, they lay there a familiar number of inches apart, waiting for each other's speculations on ~~houseboat matters~~ ~~the full evening~~ to come to the surface.

"That brother of mine," Hugh finally mulled out loud. "He must have his eye on a foreman's job."

"Darius as a gold-watch gaffer?" Meg could picture a lot about him, but not that. "What do you read that from?"

"He's keen on the dam doings, all of a sudden. Wants to know how to twitch every switch, when it comes to Owen's fancy train set."

When it comes to many things, Darius has his wants. She shifted a little on the bed. In my experience, though, such as it is--I will spare you the details, Hugh--the pronouncements that count with him are of the all too private sort. Her fresh furrow of wondering about Darius kept carefully within the lines of conversation, she said now:



"Too true, you never quite know with him, do you. I know one job I'd see him have. Yours. Lord High Executioner of snakes. Hugh, I do worry--"

"There've been times when I'd gladly have sicced them onto him,"

Hugh announced in the dark beside her. "Just to nibble on him around the edges, mind you. Teach him some manners."

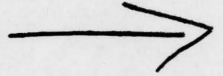
There's ever the question, isn't it, Meg held in private. How teachable  
any of us are.

## # **DROP CAP**

September had come chilly, with mean early frosts and a sharpness to the air, and Charlene drove to work these mornings. <sup>Why</sup> ~~Quite how~~ she had let herself in for this she wasn't sure, but she swung by to give <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Phonda~~ a lift to work each morning now, too. Two lifts, as Charlene saw it: to Meg's to leave off Jackie and then on to the Romiola. Regular bus service. The Charlene Stage Line.

"Aun' Char'ene! Watch!! I being a pony!!!" Jackie thundered past her when she stepped in to collect <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Phonda~~ and him now. Charlene thought Jackie was as spoiled as they come, and equine behavior at eight a.m. didn't sway her opinion any.

"We're having a time of it this morning," reported ~~Phonda~~<sup>Kate</sup>, still in  
her slip. She ~~examined~~<sup>examined</sup> Charlene, dressed to a T, and wondered how she  
managed it at this hour of the day. Without a ~~stampeding~~<sup>stampeding</sup> three-year-old,  
that's how.



"Sorry, Charlene," <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ said by rote. "We'll get ourselves lined out here, in no time. Won't we, ponyboy," she captured the scampering Jackie.

"What can I do to be vaguely helpful?" Charlene offered, to encourage matters along.

"Mum"--<sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ glanced around from putting shoes on Jackie--"my uniform still needs pressing. That fancy iron of Bruce's ran out of gas on me." Charlene firmly tucked her tongue in her cheek. Must be the only thing about <sup>him</sup>~~Bruce~~ that ever runs out of gas.

<sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ was saying, "Better let it--Jackie, honey, you are such a wiggleworm. Don't you want to go see Mum Mum?"

"I can contribute a swipe or two of ironing," Charlene <sup>offered</sup>~~provided~~, and unscrewed the spout cap on the gallon can of white gas.

"Jackie, you're going to squirm us both to death," <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ scolded. Then remembered: "That iron maybe needs another minute to cool before you--"

*Cap*  
The WHOOSH of flame came then, over where Charlene had poured the first trickle of gas into the iron's teacup-sized <sup>g</sup> tank. Fire flashed up the streamlet of gas into the can, then rivered across the floor as



Charlene had to drop the can. "Wouldn't you just know," she said almost conversationally. Then over her shoulder <sup>Kate</sup> ~~to Rhonda~~ sternly: "Get out! Take Jackie out!" Still so calm she was amazed at herself, she scanned around for something to beat at the fire with.

"Fire," Jackie said, sitting up and pointing at the flames.

<sup>Kate</sup> ~~Rhonda~~ scooped him into her arms, but stood desperately hesitating, blocked by the spread of flaming gas across the floor. The dry wood of the shanty was burning like sixty.

Charlene tipped the blazing ironing board over, out of her way to get to the water bucket. She grabbed the bucket and sloshed <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Rhonda~~ and Jackie, bringing a shriek from the boy. With the rag rug from beside the bed she whapped out a spot in the fire nearest the wall, momentarily. "Now!" she directed ~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup>. "Go, along the wall!"

<sup>Kate</sup> ~~Rhonda~~ hunched over Jackie, keeping herself between him and the flames, and twisted toward the door. Beating away with the rug, Charlene could hear her gasp at the heat, but then the door was open and the woman and child were outside.

Charlene saw that she and the rug were in a losing battle against the fire, and wished she had saved a <sup>douse</sup> ~~bucket~~ from that water bucket to and yanked it up pour on herself. She backed across the room to the window, got it unlatched

with all her strength. It rose six inches in the windowframe and then the catchpins zinged into the casement holes. Oh, fiddlesticks, still calm but needing to hurry. Another <sup>twelve inches</sup> ~~foot~~ above those holding holes was another set and if she could just get the window open that wide, she could climb out. But she needed three hands to simultaneously pull up the window and manipulate the catchpins on either side of the window. She instead let the window down and grabbed the water bucket one more time. Scars are better than burning to death, she told herself, clamped her eyes shut, and with both hands swung the empty bucket to shatter the windowglass. She had no time to knock out every last shard that stayed in the frame, and felt one get her across her shin, but then she was out, free of the licking fire.

# ———  
It was all over but the embers by the time Bruce arrived. The Fort Peck fire department was parsimoniously hosing down the charred heap--not that much of a heap, either; the place had gone up like a wad of paper ~~from its tanker truck.~~

# ———

All right, so it's bobbed. Maybe my customers will all want it,  
too--the latest style, the bobcut with a singe.

Charlene lay back in the easy chair, exhausted, although it was barely noon. Silence at last, after the doctor murmuringly patching her up where the broken glass raked her leg, and Hugh and Meg ~~insistently~~ <sup>over and over</sup> telling her ~~not~~ to worry, they would see to ~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> and Jackie until Bruce took hold, and Rosellen arriving breathless and pitching in to help her snip the fire-frizzed hair down to a presentable bob and making her comfortable here in the living room and insisting she and Neil ~~would~~ <sup>could</sup> bring supper over tonight, and--Charlene thought there had probably been even other chapters of commotion so far today, but she was losing track.

Her mind kept marching back to that blasted iron. Expensive purchase,  
Bruce.

Now, finally, she heard Owen's pickup door slam, and he came charging in, stopping short and blinking at the sight of her ~~in the easy chair with~~ <sup>radically barbered and</sup> her bandaged leg up on the footstool. <sup>4</sup> He crossed the room and sat on the footstool, his hand lightly cupping her ankle, the nearest safe



place to touch.

"I hear you had yourself quite a morning."

"Mnhmm. One like that will do me, for good."

Hurt no, scar yes, more of a scrape than a cut, heal up in couple of weeks, lucky it wasn't a lot worse...when they had done the topic of her leg, Owen said as if carefully taking stock:

"Glad you got the kid out."

"You're glad. That was the part that scared the pants off me, Jackie in there." Now that it was over, the boy seemed to her the best kid in the world.

Owen kept nodding. With everything going on inside of him, he knew he had to be extra careful in what he said. As utterly sympathetic as he was toward Charlene about the fire, he also was spitting mad that there would inevitably need to be another loan to Bruce and company. He knew it was the day that had him out of sorts, not to mention the shock of coming home to a shorn and wan Charlene, but he still felt entitled to be damned good and tired of having to pull strings for members of this family. It's never-ending. Wouldn't you think somebody

could hang on to what they got, for a change? No, now, that wasn't

fair, not even toward Bruce who had never heard of a piggybank, or

at least it wasn't what an attentive husband ought to be stewing about

while Charlene sat here looking badly used. To buck her up, he commended:

"When that undersheriff gave me the news, he said you had to have been cool as a cucumber, staying in there and trying to tackle that fire the way you did."

"What about dumber than a ~~truckload~~ ~~basket~~ of them, too, for trying to fill a hot iron." As Owen opened his mouth to loyally knock that down, she said in quickstep: "No, I didn't know it was hot, it was not my fault, nobody's fault, it could have happened to Eenie, Meenie, Minie or Moe."

She stopped, to put together the next. "But something about it was dumb, Owen. The, I don't know, the situation was dumb, if nothing else."

"It must be catching," he surprised her with. She saw that he suddenly looked as tired as she felt. "Lot of dumb situation going around," he went on, absently stroking her ankle. "I got greeted with a gravel train that broke loose last night. A cut of twenty cars. They're scrap iron now." He brought his attention up from the ankle

714A

and white-wrapped shin to her face. "That's why they couldn't track me down for you sooner. I was up there at the spillway, trying to get somebody to tell me how long that siding will be out of commission."

Charlene quickly put a hand to her leg so he might think her wince came from there. "That's dreadful, Ownie. Is it...going to put you off schedule?"

"It doesn't make a fillmaster's life one goddamn bit easier, that's for sure. Now I have to tackle the Colonel and Santee on squeezing in a few more gravel cars per train until--" he broke off the work talk, a little guiltily. "Well. I'm glad you're in one piece."

"Mmmmm. Pretty much."

Rat-a-tat-ta-- <sup>ca</sup>Knuckles on the front door seemed to spring it open, and Bruce was standing there.

"Came to see the firebug."

Before Owen could launch up from the footstool, Charlene <sup>started trying to fend:</sup> ~~fended.~~

"Sorry about how that ironing job turned out, Bruce. Really, I--"

"Hey, never mind."

p. 714B follows →



714B

Plainly Bruce was in an ashen state of mind. Who wouldn't be? Owen had to admit, still tensed to head him off. But Bruce didn't seem to need any heading off. "I hate it that you got bunged up yourself," he told Charlene, giving her the most solemn expression she'd ever seen from him. She looked grateful beyond measure.

Big of the kid, thought Owen, amazed. If somebody had just burned up everything I owned, I'm not sure I'd--

Turning to Owen, Bruce kept his face arranged to hide what he felt. Christ Jesus, this was hard. He'd still rather take a beating than to have to deal with Owen. But he managed to say the rest of what he intended. "Mother's got matters under control--Kate and Jackie are getting her royal treatment. I seem to have a housing situation to talk to you about, though, Ownie."

Owen swallowed, and nodded.

# —————  
They lived with Mum Mum and Gramp now. Daddy, Mommy, him.

"For good?" he asked Mommy.

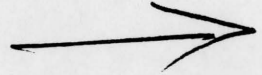
→  
p. 714C follows →

She told him, "For worse, seems like, <sup>Jackiebox</sup>~~Jackaloesa~~."

Daddy heard and gave her a frown and him a tickle and told him

<sup>ca</sup>  
they were going to live in a tailor house soon.

# \_\_\_\_\_



**DROP CAP** Every morning now Darius stepped out onto the deck of the houseboat

feeling the world had gone farther downhill.

The minuet of the cowards, London and Paris to Munich and Berchtesgaden, played night after night from the pitiless radio. Proxy would arrive home in the small hours and find him hunched, captive to listening, mind on the Czechs and the Sudetenland Germans and the frantic diplomats and Hitler's troop movements. The first few times, she came over to where he sat, and did things to him until Europe couldn't compete.)

~~Proxy could fiddle a man crazy.~~ But when this kept on, the choir of woe from the radio holding him there each night, it irritated her to have to draw his attention that way--it used to be, he was all volunteer-- and she took to stepping past him, turning the radio down low, and with her fingers making a mocking walkie-walkie exit up his sleeve and over his back and away, she drifted to bed alone.

He knew he could not get by with being automatic toward Proxy. Not for long. Part of him knew too that hypnotic flames such as Munich were the oldest hopelessness, man fated to be more savage than ~~any creature~~ ~~anything~~ the world had seen yet. It would have settled everything, the corner of



dour logic in Darius Duff said, if the first human looking into a fire had gone blind from it. Cats or ravens could have evolved into the arbiters of life. But no, the human species had learned to peek, and then to eye each other across the dancing blaze and argue the distribution of firepits. Politics, the answering corners of Darius said, were a necessary madness. If the argument with our own natures did not go on, why exist? And so, all apologies to Proxy and her wares, but these nights he was away to that other desire.

#

"Rough luck about Bruce and Kate and the lad."

"Yeah," Owen ground out around the sandwich he was wolfing into, "you bet." Darius was right on that score, at least. Bruce seemed to take it as a matter of course when Owen came through with not only a transfusion of money but the idea of <sup>his</sup> ~~Owen~~ and Charlene's old trailer house, now sitting surplus in Park Grove, which was taking some real finagling with the Corps. Not the easiest item to fit through channels, a kid brother with pernicious anemia of the wallet. Acting as if his household burned down every day, Bruce merely had said "Getting us a ringside seat for your dredging, huh, Ownie?" And it was true, the

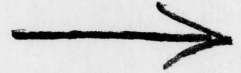
Gallatin held sway in that vicinity, slurping away at a neighborhood of abandoned shanties, and its giant pipeline and all three from the other dredges snaked right through town--life in Park Grove, down from the dam, had the reputation of being like living under a sink. Owen felt sorry for Kate, reduced to those circumstances, but for Bruce, not noticeably. Beggars, it had never seemed more true, can't be  
choosers.

"Is that to be the story of what you in this country call 'the American century,' do you think, <sup>the</sup>~~Owen?~~" Darius was suddenly at. These noon jousts of theirs often took sharp turns, <sup>and</sup>~~but~~ this one caught Owen mired in a mouthful of sandwich. Chewing fast to catch up, he stared inquisitively at Darius.

"Bruce and company hiphopping from handout to handout, makework to makework," Darius inclined his head to the <sup>half-dredged</sup>~~half-eaten~~ sprawl of Park Grove below the dam. "While Owen and company"--here he mimicked doffing his cap to the dam and the Corps townsite beyond--"are the masters with the blueprints."

Owen swallowed furiously. "~~Darius~~<sup>you</sup> you've been here since I forget  
when and you still don't savvy thing one about Fort Peck."

"I 'savvy,' as you say, ~~Owen~~<sup>that</sup> that it has paid off handsomely for  
you. A good house for you and the lovely Charlene, a fancy wage,





doubtless your pick of a next job as Roosevelt doles out these projects.

While the rest of--"

"Is that what you think I'm at, here? Jesus aching Christ, Darius.

You make me tired. I'm at this job to do it up royally, build this dam

the best way I know how. That's the point, to any of this."

"Ah, but is it. Isn't it more the point to keep society lulled with a bit of work, a bit of wage, while there's no real solving of anything?"

"Lull--? Where's anybody who's lulled, around here? These guys are going to go around saying until their dying breath, 'I worked on Fort Peck.'"

"But you'll always sing the lead, won't you?"

"What the hell is it you think, that a mob of people can just fling themselves at something and it'll be built? You can't get away with that <sup>9</sup>  
~~Darius.~~ <sup>J</sup> They couldn't even at Dnieperstroy. <sup>The Sovietskis</sup> ~~They~~ had Cooper and Company  
 in there as engineers, somebody's got to be answerable when you're build--"

"Knowhow, the American language, I'm sure <sup>11</sup> ~~Owen~~ <sup>Owen</sup>"

"In any language! Even in Red!" Owen was up and standing over him.

Now he shouted over the top of Darius's head. "Max!" Sangster, mid-distance

figure overseeing an extension of the dredgeline strutwork, turned and waved. "Cover until I get back, okay?" Owen called to him through cupped hands. "And ring up Jepperson, would you, and tell him I'm detaching this one"--he jerked a quick thumb at Darius--"for a little while." Then he spun around to his uncle, frowning intently at him and then down the abutment slope to the motor pool vehicles. "Get in the pickup."

Darius cocked his head warily. "What would be the reason for that?"

"There's something I want to show you at the spillway."

"Hold on, Owen--I've had the ha'penny tour of the spillway once already, you know."

"Get in the goddamn pickup before I stuff you in it!"

Darius closeted his anger in the face of Owen's worse case of it, and climbed in the government pickup. Owen veered over to the nearest ransack shack where tools and supplies were kept, grabbed a sizable empty box and flung it in the back of the pickup. Then, mystifying Darius, he drove without a word across the dam, the opposite direction from the spillway, and up into the Fort Peck townsite. At the bowling alley, he jammed to a halt. Darius could not resist asking:

"Are we going to settle this with a duel of skittles?"

Still wordless, Owen slammed out of the pickup and into the bowling alley and soon came back with the box full, heaving it with a grunt into the back of the pickup. He glowered at Darius for a moment through the back window of the cab, then ~~got~~<sup>jumped</sup> in again and drove across the dam, this time unmistakably into the maze of humpy little hills that would bring them out beside the spillway, and its rail spur.

Darius appraised Owen, stonily driving, and felt a sense of arguer's stimulation along with his apprehension. He had missed Jaarala something fierce; someone who grasped by habit, almost by bloodright, the need to chew at the heels of the powers ~~that be~~<sup>I g</sup>. He even pined a bit for Mott, bent trumpet though he had turned out to be.

---

Darius tensed as the pickup barreled down a hill to where acetylene flickers threw light and shadow over an iron valley of wreckage, the cutting torches at work on railcars crumpled and tangled like a kicked set of toys.

Sabot, Owen. A wooden shoe--French, as it happens. The word is  
from that, sabotage is. But I suppose you know so, educated fool that



you are.

The first time, the wrench into the gear-teeth, was mad fury; Darius himself would not have called it anything other. Tactics, however, were fury pounded cold and snipped into actions, were they not.

*itals*

The movement, you see, Owen. You think you know by book what it is about, what I am about. And you can't, poor learned mealmate. "In the mind of every man, hidden under the ashes, a quickening fire"--biblical to me as your blueprints are to you. Tactic by tactic, "compatible with the minimum of brutality": my gospel, old Sorel's as far as he went, you would pry at instantly, ask "Who gets to set the minimum?" I could tell you--but must never--that it sometimes sets itself; that a George Crawford and I blunder it back and forth between us until, bad surprise, one of us exists no more. But here within our family enterprise, as you regard Fort Peck, metal is the minimum.

The machine-breakers. Did you ever read up on them, in your earnest engineering courses? Not a man at this dam, except perhaps you, would know the name "Ned Ludd" if it floated in his breakfast bowl. But what a bogeyman old Ned was, set loose by laborers when they burned hay-ricks

and clothiers' mills, broke up knitting looms and wrecked the winding gears at mine pits. You're a man of numbers, you'll appreciate this: before the Luddites were done making their point by riot, London had to put them down with an army the size of those it was sending against Napoleon. But even that didn't put paid to the tactic itself. Were Jaarala here, he could tell you of the IWW's knack of slowing a sawmill with but one spike driven into a log.

And here we're all at making this one great machine of yours, this dam, are we not. And why? To take everyone's mind off any cause except perfecting the gadget, a thing that turns running water into standing water. Cleverest sink plug in the world, this Fort Peck machine.

So what I have done to machinery in a few nights of slipping sabots into the works, Owen, dear, is to make the kings of things know. Your Corps. Your construction companies. Your dolemaster Roosevelt. For that matter, you, who have no quarrel with the <sup>order</sup>~~order~~ of things so long as it mee<sup>t</sup>~~s~~ schedules and sets records. But those who put their hands to the work ought to own that work, Owen. That's flat basic. That's the meaning of the movement, poor battered bastard piece of history that

it is. Of myself, we may as well say. As long as there is one spoor of the movement--I somehow seem to have become that minimum, here--the rest of you are made to know that the order of things can be turned upside down.

Mind awirl, Darius cut glances from the smashed gravel cars just ahead to the unreadable profile of Owen. As they pulled even with the railroad spur, Owen swept a tallying look along the wreck and the repair work.

And drove on by.

Before Darius quite caught his breath, they were alongside the huge concrete trench of the spillway, Owen jouncing them down through the hills next to the gape of it, Darius having to keep watch back and forth between his possessed nephew and the mile-long fan of spillway floor below his side of the pickup.

The pickup roared to the service ramp which angled down onto the spillway. The watchman there, appalled to have this traffic, waved them on in a hurry when Owen flashed his particular job button.

Now, by God, Darius. Push the political wool away from your eyes

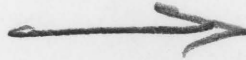


for once. Now you're about to see some solving.

Owen drove up the spillway, no longer the dirt canyon where Proxy gave Darius lessons in how to herd the truck but a vast inclined floor of concrete sections as neat and new as fresh linoleum. Halfway along, Owen abruptly pulled to a halt.

"Sit," he said to Darius as he would to a dog.

He himself bailed out of the pickup cab, hefted the box from the back, and over



at the center seam of the concrete sections, a groove perhaps half the size of a rain gutter, he yanked bowling pins out by the neck and meticulously set them up, all ten at last standing at attention in their formation.  
 triangle Darius watched silently.

Back into the pickup, Owen drove a ways while watching the rearview mirror. When he stopped this time, Darius knew to get out with him.

The pins were specks in the distance, against the fresh gray of the concrete. Owen hefted the bowling ball out of the box. Going over to the seam in the concrete, he put the bowling ball down onto the shallow groove and gave just enough of a push to start the black ball rolling. The two men listened to the slight rumble as the ball rolled and rolled, holding to the hairline mark of channel in the middle of the concrete expanse, until it looked the size of a BB demolishing the formation of the pins.

*after the distant clatters*  
 "That's engineering," said Owen. "'Knowhow,' if that's the best you can stand to call it," Darius. He swept his hand around to indicate the concrete canyon they were in. "This was all hills and coulees, shalebanks until Hell wouldn't have it--you couldn't have flown pigeons

through here without them getting dizzy. Now take a look. Go ahead.

Look!" <sup>#</sup>Darius with obvious reluctance moved his eyes from Owen to the <sup>straight</sup>immense gout of the spillway, half a mile of concrete ahead of them to

where it met the river below the dam and even more of it behind them

where the colossal spillgates stood. <sup>#</sup>"A mile of concrete in here,"

Owen resumed intensely, "laid two feet thick, down a five percent grade,

and all of it so goddamn exact and smooth that ball rolled along it

without ever bouncing, didn't it. Blueprints and specs and hard-ass engineers

and crews who want to go about it right, this is the kind of thing we

can give the world. It's what the dam is going to be, something that

works like it's supposed to. We know how on this, you bet we do. Those

pie <sup>in the</sup>sky politics of yours, though, ~~Darius~~ they can't ever take

the world in hand <sup>this same</sup>~~that~~ way. You can work on how to run people until

you turn blue, be my guest, but I'm going to keep doing what I can see

a real result on. Dams, jobs. The actual factual, Darius."

"If I ever see the light, ~~Owen~~ <sup>I</sup> I'm sure it'll be because you

brained me with it," Darius said with surprising surrender. "Does

this conclude the sermon for today?"



Owen actually had been set to argue on and on, until he had Darius's cuckoo politics backed into the corner where they belonged. He was somehow disappointed to see this expression on Darius, which looked oddly like a smile of relief.

#

"You know my inclination about the stoppage rate," <sup>the</sup> Colonel ~~Pemberton~~ <sup>commented</sup> said. "Zero would be a nice number to have."

Both supposed to be at ease in front of his desk, Major Santee and Captain Brascoe conspicuously waited for each other to respond first.

Rank always told. Giving way under the major's bland silence, Brascoe had to offer up: "We--I still think the breakdowns are nothing but carelessness."

"Sugar in gas tanks isn't careless," Santee took advantage of that.

"Someone mad at a foreman is all that one amounted to, I believe," <sup>the</sup> Colonel ~~Pemberton~~ <sup>commented</sup> weighed in unexpectedly. "Someone has to get the deuces and treys of life, and whoever did, that day, lost his head and went sugaring."

Santee and Brascoe waited out the colonel's pensive expression.

When his eyes snapped to the captain again, Brascoe reported: "The federales in Butte are about done running their check on our fingerprint files, sir. Nobody matches up yet to their list of known radicals, and they're up to the R's."

<sup>the</sup> Colonel ~~Pemberton~~ <sup>Armenter</sup> turned his head to the other officer. "We know there's nothing to fear in the names starting with S, right, Joe?"

"Yes, sir," Major Santee answered by rote.

Colonel ~~Pemberton~~ <sup>Armenter</sup>'s mouth turned down. He did not make many jokes, and wanted it acknowledged when he did. He swung back to Brascoe, who resumed:

"I've put on more watchmen. Beyond that, it's a question of taking measures that will slow up the night work and--"

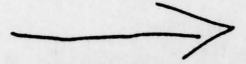
"No," <sup>the</sup> Colonel ~~Pemberton~~ <sup>Armenter</sup> cut in. "I'd bet these spots of trouble are just a little run of bad luck. Keep the work at full push. Dismissed, gentlemen."

# \_\_\_\_\_  
**DROP CAP**

There was not a man or woman at Fort Peck who did not forever remember precisely where they were and what they were at shortly after noon on September 22nd of 1938.

p. 727A follows →

Hugh was by the front door of the Blue Eagle, trying to look as if the saloon had sneaked up on him instead of vice versa. With a last bleak glance along the main street of Wheeler--after all, what could he say to Meg or any of the rest of the family if he was caught <sup>at</sup> slipping in here: Eh, have you heard there's an epidemic of amnesia?--





in he went, heart hammering.

The saloon was all but empty. Right time of day for this, at least. Tom Harry <sup>scanned</sup> ~~seinted~~ down the bar at him in sardonic surprise. "Look what the snakes chased in."

"The riprap work is shut down for a little while," Hugh defended his presence here. "They're mucking around with a walking crane that got itself stuck." Giving him just time enough for this. He hoped.

Tom Harry seemed to have heard that one and all other variations before. He added to that impression with a bartender shrug and said, "What can I get you, a glass of mother's milk or what?"

By now Hugh qualified as a connoisseur of soda pop, working his way through the flavors. His latest, Orange Crush, he considered sweetly vile.

"You can't tell me you don't miss the real stuff," Tom Harry prodded as he set the garish bottle of pop before Hugh.

"I can never touch it again, that's all," Hugh said nobly.

"Not ever, huh? That's a long dry while, Duff."

Hugh looked at him with a start of panic, as if Tom Harry somehow

knew what they had all ended up confessing to each other at the Carteret Institute, outside the Amen Corner sessions, afterward when no staff were around: that <sup>↑</sup>yes, if a man knew he was about to be on his deathbed; say he had only a month to live, doctor's sworn diagnosis; then, yes, every last one of them had concluded that under such circumstances they would go on ~~on a~~ <sup>a final</sup> ~~last~~ blue-screaming wall-eyed delirious jag. "There I stood at the gate of God, drunk but unafraid," quoted one of the Southerners, who tended to be dreamy and literary. But that was wish, the fuzzwuzzland <sup>2</sup> called If. Here and now, a man honorably cured would...

"You heard me, you smirky bastard," Hugh said to Tom Harry. "Never." He drained the last of the Orange Crush. "Give me another of those putrid things."

# — Owen's mind was on shale, which still was slipping off the east bank into the core pool and messing up his waterlevel.

How the hell am I supposed to stay on the mark if that stuff dumps itself in whenever it feels like it?

The second hell of it was, this was a perfectly nice day, for

a change; the rowdy weather that moved in after Labor Day had finally petered out and now the sky chose Indian summer, chinked with a few high streaks of cloud, thin and shaped like wingspans of birds. Owen a lot rather would have been at lunch, sunning himself and making Swiss cheese of Darius's arguments, than trotting to the far end of the core pool again. Not for the first time, he wished the planet had been constructed without any Bearpaw shale.

The boss of the survey crew, Pete Blegen, hailed <sup>him</sup> ~~Owen~~ before he could reach the latest slide of shale and commence swearing at the substance.

"The freeboard reading is way ~~to hell~~ under," Blegen reported as if relieved to be rid of the news. <sup>"Hate to tell you, but it's</sup> ~~"It's at only three feet."~~

"Can't be," Owen said instantly, then gave Blegen a quit-kidding grin.

"Better not be."

In spite of himself Owen spun around to shoot a glance at his dredgeline, eyeballing the cascade from its discharge pipes into the pool water beneath. The specification there he knew as well as his own name. A constant four and a half feet interval was supposed to be maintained



between the waterlevel in the core pool and the discharge empty<sup>y</sup>ing into it, so that the fill would drain and settle properly. The reading Blegen had given him, off the mark by, Christ, a foot and a half, meant either a mighty amount of shale had slipped into the pool and brought its waterlevel up that much, or the dredgeline had sunk that much. Either sounded ~~grazy~~<sup>wacky</sup>, and Owen had to hope the discrepancy was in the surveyors' numbers. He carefully watched Blegen's face. "You're not fooling, huh?"

"That's the reading I got."

"Pete, go run your level on it again. The Ad Building's going to want a confirmation." So do I, you better bet, Owen's expression told the surveyor and sent him off at double-time.

# ———  
Hard damned stuff to nurse, Hugh decided of the Orange Crush as the second bottle rapidly emptied despite his every effort at moderation. Sighing heavily, he signaled Tom Harry for another. As the barkeeper bore the next bottle to him, Hugh restlessly asked:

"What time does she come on?"

"Who?" said Proxy, from the doorway. "Mother Machree?"

# ———

I hope the rest of the day isn't going to go like this. As ever,  
 Owen would rather have ~~taken a beating~~ <sup>eaten toads</sup> than have to shut down his dredgeline,  
 but he trudged over to the nearest field telephone and stood by. Specs  
are specs, another unwelcome but unavoidable thought. If the core pool  
 waterlevel was really as far out of whack as Blegen maintained, they  
 shouldn't keep pouring fill in. Can't. Don't dare. It'll mush up,  
if it hasn't already. Any toddler making mudpies knew the right recipe:  
 just enough water, not too damn little, not too sonofabitching much.  
 As we all of a sudden seem to have ~~a~~ <sup>an extreme</sup> ~~50%~~ excess of, here in the world's  
biggest core pool, congratulations, ~~Fillmaster~~ <sup>Fillmaster</sup> ~~Engineer~~ Duff.

He watched as the survey crew, down at the edge of the pool, unanimously  
 gave him a hateful glance over their shoulders when Blegen told them they  
 had to re-run their reading. The astronomers, as they were known, already  
 felt it was beneath their dignity to be squinting through their lovely  
 transits in the muck <sup>around</sup> ~~of~~ the core pool. Blegen's tone of voice, though,  
 was sending them hopping to do it over.

Waiting, Owen prowled three paces back and forth, as if tethered to  
 the field telephone post. At least misery had a lot of company this

afternoon. He could see ~~see~~<sup>down</sup> onto the face of the dam where the riprap work was gummed up, too; halted for the past half hour or so because the walking crane had mired in a soft spot. They--~~which~~<sup>g</sup> when it came to snotty tasks ~~that~~<sup>that</sup> always meant the bullgang--were going to have to walk the huge Cat-tread crane out to firmer ground by laying big wooden mats in front of its tracks. But right now, hanging loose, smoking and joking until the trucks with the mats showed up, none among the bullgang looked looser than the rail-thin figure spectating up in Owen's direction. Darius to the rescue, the thought momentarily entertained Owen, whether or not a stuck crane can be elevated according to Marx.

Blegen was yelling for his attention.

The survey boss had his arm up, three fingers extended toward Owen, as if bidding at an auction. The freeboard reading had surveyed out at three feet again. Damn.

Now Blegen pointed emphatically with his other arm at the dredgeline discharge pipe. The survey crew had run a separate reading on it from a benchmark this time, and Owen Duff's core pool was not up a foot and a half; Owen's Duff's dredgeline had sunk, sagged, that much.



What a horseshit turn of events this is. Owen sourly fieldphoned all four dredgemasters and told them to shut down. He hated the next step and had to keep telling himself over and over regs are regs, too, Duff, even for you as he picked up the phone again and, like any man of regulations who had both a <sup>crane</sup> ~~steamshovel~~ and a pipeline bogged down in inexplicable soft spots in his dam, notified the Ad Building.

#

The two of them, Proxy and Hugh, resorted to the backmost table at the Blue Eagle, out of the saloon traffic and Tom Harry's range of hearing.

"Odd time of day for this, I know," he stabbed at making conversation.

She wasn't sure why, but she gave him a break by not asking if he had gone to all this trouble of looking her up to tell her the time.

"Different in here in broad daylight," she granted, nodding a greeting to the piano player Gert as she passed by to her keyboard with a brimming shot glass carried carefully in each hand. "A little."

Hugh watched the shot glasses go past as if they were <sup>the crown jewels</sup> ~~a double show~~ on show.

~~of comets.~~ He turned again to Proxy with a surprisingly winning rueful smile. "Not so much temptation to expand the job, you mean?"

"Hugh, I said 'a little.'" Not that it was any of his business, but she would let him know anyway. "I go out back with somebody if and when I want. But I'm not taking on drunks and wet-eared kids and whatever else in pants that walks in here, am I. I mostly dance any more, okay?"

Now what's on your mind besides your chapoo."

"A thing I need to know <sup>"Proxy"</sup> ~~Proxy~~."

"Just one? Aren't you lucky." ~~Curiosity had her, though.~~

"That brother of mine and whatever he might be getting himself into," Hugh named off. ~~Straightforwardly~~ <sup>g</sup> he looked Proxy over, as if sizing up a witness. Not that it was possible to be neutrally judicious in looking Proxy over. "As regards political matters," Hugh thought he had better specify. "If that size of words covers the matter of Darius."

She couldn't help smiling a little. One thing life with Darius had taught her was that a response didn't necessarily have to be an answer.

"You've known him a real lot longer than I have," she now responded.

"I knew him when we were lads and I've known him since he showed up here cap in hand. There's damn near all of history in between." And

a bothering quantity since, such as fingerprints that want hiding and

trains that become a topic of conversation one fine night and let go  
their brakes soon thereafter. That's what I need to know of our Darius,  
Proxy. If I am right. If I am not the world's leading fool, which  
sometimes has been the case, too.

"Why care?" Proxy asked as if she could use the answer. "Why let yourself in for heartburn?"

"Proxy, now, that's up there with the best of them, isn't it, in the all-time questions," Hugh told her in a tone that gave no ground. "It would take somebody who can lie faster than a horse can trot to say we're always happy with the object of our interest. There are times we're simply stuck with it, aren't we." He clonked the pop bottle on the table, looked at it, picked it back up, then glanced across and held his gaze steady against hers. "I was handed Darius for a brother, and I helplessly care."

Proxy studied him. More than years, or politics either, made a difference between Hugh and Darius. Hugh had rough spots in him you couldn't iron out with a steamroller, but at least they were on the map. Watching him sit across from her and take a swig of orange pop now

p. 736A follows →



with repulsion and determination, she kind of liked the fact that while he had cleaned up his drinking, he hadn't gone Holy Joe in any other way.

#

Neil liked to know what he was doing, but working with Birdie Hinch had its mysteries.

As now, when they had just come on shift, a little late as Birdie seemed to think was their right, and were starting their patrol of the dredgeline along the crest of the dam when Birdie let out a buzzsaw whine-- which Neil after a moment realized was an Oklahoma rendition of Gawwwdd <sup>sun caps</sup> DAMN!--and threw his hat at the first drain<sup>g</sup> trap.

"Lookit that!" Birdie <sup>st</sup>~~st~~romped over to the huge pocket of metal beneath the first section of pipeline and crammed his hat back on his head. "Bastards on the last shift left us a clogged trap," he complained. "That ain't fair play. They ain't supposed to hightail off before--"



"Is this what's got everything shut down?" Owen ~~already~~ hadn't looked as if he was in his best mood when the pair of them had to go past him on their way out here, so Neil was uneasy with the idea of the entire work of the dam hung up waiting on how expeditiously he and Birdie Hinch could clean out a trap.

"Naw," Birdie answered. "Something else." Slower than molasses but without wasting an ounce of effort, Birdie began undoing the turnbuckles on his side of the pipeline trap, still voicing hurt over the unfairness of the previous shift. When the trap hinged open, though, Birdie drew in his breath sharply.

"I take it all back. Our ship just come in, Neil," he crowed. "We got ourselves a wowser of a skull, look at that sucker. Tom Harry'll pay plenty for this one."

The buffalo head, with one cavern of eye socket peering out of the muck and twin hooks of horn on guard, ~~looked~~ <sup>appeared</sup> weirdly determined to stay buried in the clot of clay. Birdie in admiration, Neil in resignation, they hunkered down to study the tub-sized skull.

"Alas, poor shaggy Yorick."

"Huh?" They both jumped ~~a little~~ at the intonation from Darius, who was standing over their shoulders.

"What the dingdong hell is that supposed to mean?" Birdie demanded with a querulous squint.

Darius's hand made a wiping never-mind motion against the air.

"What's the bollix that has us shut down?" He knew virtually all there was to know about work stoppages, but this standstill puzzled him.

"It ain't us," Birdie fairly spat. "The bastards before us left--"

Darius did not stay for the recitation, simply shook his head impatiently and clambered back down from the crest of the dam to where the rest of the bullgang were still lounging around, standing on one foot and then the other and wisecracking about easy money today, tourist wages.

Birdie and for that matter Neil had other things on the mind right now than Darius. They barely watched him go before the lodged skull claimed their fullest attention again. "A lot of people might call me a liar on this," Birdie said judiciously, "but I'd say this is the stud daddy of all buffalo."



"Yeah, right, it's a whopper," Neil had to agree distastefully. He didn't like the look of the thing, blind to the bone yet that socket seeming to fix an eternal stare on them. Weird business with eyes bothered him, still. If it was up to him, he would smash the staring monstrosity with a crowbar, break it out of there in pieces like a giant eggshell before the dredgeline boss or even Owen himself came and got on their backs. But one of Birdie's vocations was involved here. "Okay, what's ~~what's~~ the recipe for getting the thing out?"

"See, all's we do, Neil, is you work on that clay around it and I pry in kind of gentle behind it. I got to ~~get~~ ~~have~~ a lady shovel for that. Be right back."

As Birdie scooted off along the crest of the dam, Neil shrugged out of his jacket, slung it over the nearest pipeline support, and started clearing muck away from the buffalo skull.

# —————  
Darius still did not like the setup of this shift.

The big bugs--some ~~officers from the Corps~~ <sup>foremen of the work gangs</sup>, and contractors' superintendents, and a clot of engineers featuring of course Owen--were clustering at the lip of the core pool where the field telephone

was located. In Darius's experience, an assembly of bosses always brought trouble. He glanced along the dam for any sign of equipment breakdown or someone injured, but that did not seem to be it.

He checked again toward Neil and Birdie, Neil noggin down at work on the clogged trap and Birdie skylarking off in search of a small-headed shovel. Nothing to be divined from that pair except the cranial measurements of a buffalo. On impulse Darius headed up the face of the dam. Whatever the war council was about, up there, he wanted to take a gander at it himself.

"Hey!" the bullgang foreman Jepperson yelled. "Where you going, Scotchman? Christ's sake, you <sup>haven't</sup> ~~ain't~~ even put your gloves on yet."

"Drastic case of the drizzles," Darius called back over his shoulder and climbed faster.

He reached the crest in time to see a car rapidly coming, that of <sup>the</sup> ~~Colonel Pemberton~~ <sup>armande</sup>, biggest bug of the outfit. Something tickled in the back of Darius's mind and down his neck. He halted and sighted west along the top of the dam.

The steel rails of the railroad track were bending sideways,  
bulging like a drawn bow.

Darius turned east and ran, toward the shore, to race all the way  
back to Scotland if that's what it took.

~~##~~ \_\_\_\_\_

To Owen, the start of the slide was like a heat shimmer, as when  
waves of air danced in the alfalfa field in hottest summer. Slow and  
hazy to the eye, distorting everything. Bringing about the unbelievable:  
the railroad track snapping apart sideways, <sup>as if</sup> ~~apparently~~ of its own volition.

Next the lightpoles swayed as they couldn't possibly, and then swooned  
to the upstream side of the dam. The slope there of fill and gravel  
and partial riprap looked out of kilter to him, oddly unmoored. God, no!

The whole thing can't-- Along the crest of the dam the dredgeline was  
crumpling section by section, almost orderly. Neil! Get the hell--

Then, though, everything speeded up. Crevices cut the earthfill of the  
dam's upstream face, collapsing it into mush. The water in the core pool  
was vanishing, a wet roar was over everything, people scrambled everywhere.

A damworker darted past Owen so fast he only belatedly realized it was  
Statuelike,  
Darius. ~~Already incredulous at the extent of the slippage,~~ Owen watched



~~statuelike~~ as a half-mile section hinged away from the rest of the dam and slid into the lake, taking with it the ~~walking~~ ~~riprap~~ crane and bulldozers and trucks and the railroad track and the dredgeline and men.

# ——— Some one hundred and eighty of them were at work on the east upstream section of the dam when it gave way, and the eight or ten minutes of the slide turned them into hydraulic arithmetic.

The riprap crew nearest the east bank comprised the main number, about a hundred and twenty-five. They were waiting to start laying the next tier of rock, as soon as the crane got back into action and resumed hoisting big quarry boulders from the railcars down onto the face of the dam for them. Meanwhile they were killing time by greasing their equipment and trading insults with the bullgang, below them where the crane had sunk into unusually wet gravel. Close to the crest of the dam as they were, the riprap crew had mostly level running when someone shouted Look out, there she goes! and the slide started. They fled, clambered, vaulted, whatever it took, in wild retreat to the east bank of the river valley, the face of the dam crumbling at their heels.

# ———

Five persons were in the ~~Colonel's~~ car. Colonel <sup>Armenter</sup> ~~Pemberton~~ and Major Santee and Captain Brascoe, all in the backseat, saw the calamity past flinching heads in front of them. For Max Sangster, coming out to see if he could lend Owen a hand with the core pool puzzle and sitting across from the ~~Colonel's~~ driver, the slide was framed in the windshield, horror focused in the panel of glass. Half a decade of engineering, millions of cubic yards of Fort Peck Dam, were melting like brown sugar in front of Sangster's eyes. He and the three officers were thrown forward as the driver hit the brakes, then the car was racing in reverse, the ~~Colonel's~~ wordless driver turned tautly half-around as he steered over his shoulder and gunned the accelerator, one crevice after another opening and folding away from where the car had just been.

#

Scattered across the half-mile slope of caving earth, four dozen men of the bullgang rode the slide. A typical set of them, a pair of workers watched by Owen from his helpless distance, managed to leap across two cracks that opened in front of them, but the third took them and then closed over them. For a panicked moment both thought they would suffocate, but water gushed up below and pushed them out where they

could breathe. The water tumbled them down the ooze into the lake, where they had to fight not to be sucked down by a whirlpool. There were islands of muck now, a Missouri archipelago in the lake, and they managed to pull each other onto one of these mud mounds and cling there until a motorboat crew came for them. Other escapes, out across the tide of devastation by twos and threes and other handfuls, were just as miraculous.

Those who died did so one by one.

A deckhand on the workboat at the foot of the riprap saw the vast wall of avalanche coming, grabbed the railing, but was swept overboard and buried in the mudslide's ~~immensity~~.

A young riprap worker who had been down on one knee tying a shoelace when the damslope gave way also was buried, and suffocated; hours of effort to revive him in an iron lung failed.

A bullgang ~~member~~ <sup>laborer</sup> who seized a passing section of dredgeline strutwork was carried safely down the trajectory of the slide but jarred loose when it careened into the lake, and drowned.

Four simply vanished.

# ———

Neil was carving clay away from the buffalo skull when he felt the ground shake. He thought a bulldozer must have run into the



dredgeline, and he jerked his head out of the trap of the pipe to have a look. Then he felt the general motion, the slippage, everything tipping. Around him the dredgeline crew was running, trying to run; he saw Birdie disappear in a quicksandlike whorl of gravel. The dredgeline was starting to snake down the slope, atop the avalanche of all the fill material from the crest of the dam on down. Jesus, this is worse than-- To get out of the gravel tearing at his feet, Neil straddled up onto the dredgeline pipe, desperately hugging down around it to grab the trap's turnbuckles to hang on to. Bareback on the Chinese dragon of pipe, he rode down the avalanche toward the waiting water.

# — Owen backpedaled, skittered sideways, outright ran when he had to, but always with his head turned toward the slide, staying clear of the crater in the side of the core pool as it washed out, all the while trying to register where Neil would end up.

# — Rosellen was making short work of next week's Corps duty roster, paying only half attention to it whapping through the typewriter, glancing ~~looking~~ up and around her for the latest on the rumor that had been bouncing through the Ad Building. Some sort of problem at the dam.

She noticed Major Santee's secretary, Betty ~~Ann~~<sup>Jane</sup>, coming her way and she timed the last of her piece of typing, as she liked to do, so that she could rip it out of the typewriter and hand it across with a grin

BJ  
the instant ~~Betty Ann~~ arrived for it.

~~Betty Ann~~<sup>Jane</sup> didn't take the roster. With an odd look on her face she asked Rosellen:

"What shift is your Neil on?"

#

Wanting to throw up but telling himself he didn't have time, Owen edged back out along what was left of the rim between the core pool and where the face of the dam had been, desperate to turn around and start scanning down into the soupy mess of the slide but forcing himself to watch the remainder of the dam. Here where the slippage had occurred the dam now was narrowed by half, as if a monstrous bite had been taken out of its upstream side. As best Owen could judge, the downstream crest hadn't budged ~~an inch~~<sup>9</sup>, yet. Hadn't better, either, the sonofa-- If a similar slice of it fell away, the whole dam would go, Missourians would be fishing the bodies of half of Fort Peck out at St. Louis. The Johnstown flood, hell. The Owentown version, if it happened, would make

Johnstown look like a swimming accident. Owen Duff knew there was no

reason why the downstream side of the dam would go out, too; slippage  
a form of epidemic.

wasn't ~~infectious~~. Yet why, why had any of his scrupulous earthfill slipped?

Dancing from nerves, jittering himself out along the earthfill cliff  
with his back turned to the gulp of slide, Owen decided if the rest of  
the dam was going to go, it would go; looking at it would never stop it.  
He whirled around to what he had to face at the slide area.

An immense <sup>raw</sup>~~gulch~~ lay below him ~~now~~, half a mile across, where the  
fill had flowed out into the lake, millions of yards of carefully dredged  
material reverting into goo and gravel, and the dredgeline was strewn on  
it like sections of blown-down stovepipe.

The trap, Owen remembered. Neil had been cleaning the trap. Find  
that steel pelican-pouch in the dredgeline, what was left of it, and  
Neil ought to be with it.

## —————  
Charlene set her jaw and kept on combing out old lady Abbot<sup>t</sup>, one of  
the Cactus Flat porcupineheads, as people poured past the front window  
of the beauty shop. Must be a fire somewhere down the street, she figured,  
and she was in no mood to see another one of those. People were really



on the ~~se~~<sup>trot</sup>, though, every time she glanced up from Mrs. Abbot<sup>t</sup>'s stiff  
 obdurate hair. If she hadn't known better, she'd have thought one  
 of those pounding past in the crowd was Hugh.

From the east shore Darius stared at the delta of destruction below.  
 Some sections of the stone-tiered face of the dam had stayed intact as  
 they skidded out into the lake, solid islands like ~~pieces~~<sup>chunks</sup> of a jigsaw  
 puzzle pawed apart. A queer spur of the railroad track still was in  
 place atop the lip of the biggest island, wavery streak of rails beginning  
 in mid-air, ending in mid-air. Between the archipelago of riprap islands  
 and the damaged crest of the dam was what looked like a cesspool lake,  
 gravel and mud and the backed-up Missouri mixed into a murky brown basin.

Already the pandemonium of the escape was precipitating into hundreds  
 of separate aftermaths, ~~many~~<sup>some of the</sup> damworkers standing petrified ~~with~~<sup>overcome</sup> thoughts  
 of their close call, a legion of others racing back toward the slide area  
 to search for survivors. Darius thought of Neil with a pang. Willing cog

in the machine of work, Neil had let it cost him his life. And Owen;  
 Darius looked but could not spot him in the school of dam bosses, from  
 the Colonel on down, frantic on the far side of the slide.

Owen. Darius jerked his bitter gaze away from the gesticulating bosses and stared again at the riprap islands, strewn but solid, in the lake, suddenly knowing what he was seeing. The face of the dam, shalehater Owen's crafty dam, had not merely avalanched, had it, not plummeted apart in a simple collapse of slope. It had slipped on its under<sup>g</sup>earth, as a ship would slide down the greased launchway into the Clyde.

# ———  
"Jackie, no, you can't play soldiers in the flour bin. Meg, would you--"

"Jack, my man, let's go for a promenade." Meg captured the boy out of the trailer house kitchen that <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ was trying to set to rights and whisked him past Bruce edging through the doorway with an armload of bedding. "Perhaps it already has come to your attention, Jack," the parents heard her deep instructive tone begin before she and the boy were even past the front fender of the truck, "that the municipality of Park Grove is more grove than park."

Bruce furrowed his forehead. "He's going to grow up talking like a lawyer's parrot."

<sup>Kate</sup>  
But ~~Rhonda~~ was busy at sliding the trailer's kitchen window open.

sideways, which was going to take some getting used to. She was intent  
beyond that at watching the huge <sup>Gallatin</sup>~~Madison~~, broadside to them in a dredged  
pit less than a hundred yards away, the mountain of the dam behind it.

The giant dredge, a cross between a verandahed hotel and a steamshovel and  
painted sailor-white, was nothing like the cable ferry her grandfather and  
father had operated, yet <sup>she</sup>~~Rhonda~~ felt she had been here before. She had

been like Jackie, at the rampage age, when Grandpere died and they moved  
in with Grandmere to take over the ferry business, and that same first day  
her mother had caught her dabbling in the water <sup>alongside</sup>~~under~~ the hull of the ferry  
and given her an astounding bare-butt spanking. You are to stay away

from that river, Lucille <sup>Millay</sup>~~Labney~~ made her small daughter know between

whaps with the flat side of a yardstick, you are to stay away from that  
boat. Jackie was going to need the same, the first instant he wandered  
toward the river. Today would not be too soon, <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ believed.

Bruce's next armload of moving stuff in, she felt his flanks brush  
teasingly along her fanny as he edged past. "Close quarters," he alibied.

"Everything is, with you," she said, ~~but also provided him a little nudge~~